

Six Worlds of Digital Art: Audiences, Institutions, Values

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What is "digital art?"

The usual answer is simple: art made with digital technologies. And technology indeed matters. We can divide digital art into categories depending on what tools are used to make it, as well as output and exhibition formats. In fact, these are the usual categories used to classify digital art (net art, interactive installation, data art, and so on).

But here I want to take a different approach, inspired by ideas from the sociology of culture - and my own experiences as digital artist for over 40 years.

I began working with digital imaging and 3D animation in 1984, and started teaching and publishing about digital art in 1992. Over the next four decades I watched the field not only grow but divide. As new technologies and new opportunities appeared, new kinds of digital art developed — and each found its own *audiences, criteria for evaluation, and support structures*. I will call them worlds, following a classic of the sociology of art — Howard Becker's *Art Worlds*, 1982.

Consider three hypothetical artists. One regularly sells digital prints and receives commissions from collectors who discover the work online—through Instagram, online marketplaces, portfolio sites, or artist communities.

Another presents artwork in museums and biennials, where it is discussed by curators and critics.

A third develops interactive installations involving robotics, scientific data, or custom AI models; occasionally publishes in specialist journals; and is known mainly in media art festivals and research communities.

All three make digital art. All may be successful. But what counts as success is different in each case, because each operates within a different professional and cultural environment.

These differences suggest a different way of approaching digital art. Instead of asking only whether a work is good, original, popular, or whether it uses the latest technologies, we can ask:

Where does it circulate?

Who values it?

What are the criteria for judging works?

For digital art, we can distinguish at *least six overlapping worlds*:

1. Historical digital art

Early computer graphics, generative art, video, cybernetic art, net art, and interactive work from the 1960s onward are increasingly part of art history. Here the central questions are historical influence, documentation, preservation, and conservation. Representative figures include Vera Molnár, Manfred Mohr, Lillian Schwartz, JODI, and Olia Lialina.

2. Digital practice in contemporary art

Artists use code, AI, data, games, virtual environments, moving image and other media. Many address larger questions — power, labour, ecology, surveillance, identity, infrastructure, the changing conditions of culture — and take a critical position toward the technologies they use: Hito Steyerl, Trevor Paglen, Forensic Architecture, Anna Ridler, Lawrence Lek. Others are concerned with aesthetics, perception, scale and duration, treating computation as a material rather than a subject: Ryoji Ikeda, Ian Cheng, Rafael Lozano-Hemmer. Recognition comes through museums, biennials, curators, galleries and critical writing.

3. The specialist world of digital art

Art-and-technology conferences, university labs, creative-coding communities, and media art festivals such as Ars Electronica, ISEA, SIGGRAPH art exhibitions, the Beijing Media Art Biennale, CYFEST, and FILE São Paulo. Here the values are technical experimentation, research, sometimes published in academic journals, and collaboration across art, engineering, and science. Such artists usually do not circulate in the institutions of contemporary art — museums, fairs, biennials. This type of digital art is usually focused on exploring the artistic possibilities of the latest computer technologies. The world includes both work concerned with form and perception, and work focused on social and political issues — the same issues that occupy world 2. Representative figures include Zach Lieberman, Casey Reas, Lauren Lee McCarthy, SymbioticA, and Saša Spačal.

4. Platform digital art

This is the largest of the six worlds by sheer volume of work. Illustration, character and fan art, 3D renders, AI images, animation, and NFTs circulate through ArtStation, DeviantArt, Behance, Instagram, and marketplaces for editions. The artist posts directly to an audience, without the curators, galleries, and museums of the art world in between.

The motives are mixed. Some post to build a portfolio and get hired — here the audience that matters is a future employer. Some post to sell prints, commissions, or editions directly to buyers. Some are looking for a community of people working in the same style or medium, and for the recognition of peers. The values that follow are virtuosity and a recognizable personal style, judged in the first instance by an audience and by the platform's own metrics and ranking systems.

5. Commissioned digital media

The professional world of digital media production: interface and app design, concept art and visuals for film, television and games, motion graphics, and media for exhibitions and public spaces. All this work is commissioned, and begins with a brief specifying what the designers must accomplish. What is rewarded is the result that satisfies all brief requirements while matching the level of the best work being done in the industry at that moment. Judgment comes from an art director and a client through rounds of revision. Recognition rarely reaches the public at all: the designers who made a film's interfaces or an app's motion

system are known mainly to peers. This is the sharpest difference from the other five worlds, which are all organized around public authorship. Representative studios include Buck (motion design and animation for brands), Territory Studio (screen graphics and interfaces for film and games), and Local Projects (media design for museums and public spaces).

Please see the appendix for more details about this world.

6. Immersive spectacle

This world consists of projection-based environments, large-scale installations, and immersive experiences produced for brands and dedicated venues. Here the values are scale, sensory impact, and visitor numbers. Unlike the commissioned digital media of world 5, which serves a film, a product, or an institution and is rarely credited to its makers in public, the work here is itself the attraction and circulates under the name of the studio or artist who made it. Currently successful studios include teamLab, d'strict, and Refik Anadol Studio.

Crossings

In the 2010s an increasing number of artists in the contemporary art world began to use cutting-edge digital technologies in their work — without drawing attention to this in the accompanying descriptions. When the art world became more interested in technology toward the end of that decade, the strategy changed. Today the gallery and museum texts for exhibitions by artists such as Pierre Huyghe and Anicka Yi no longer hide the technology. It is foregrounded, because it now adds value.

But this was a shift in the contemporary art world at large. What was happening between the six digital art worlds themselves?

Until recently these worlds were largely separate. Two developments changed that. In the 2010s museums began to include digital work in their exhibitions and collections. This opened a door into world 2 for some artists who had until then circulated only through festivals and labs. (The Whitney Museum's artport, founded by curator Christiane Paul in 2001, has outlasted every comparable program and continues to commission new work.)

Then the NFT boom of 2021 gave world 4 its own market and its own validating institutions. Today these new institutions — Art Blocks, for example — continue to function, although the market has become much smaller. But the NFT moment was significant because it drew more attention to digital art as a whole from museums, auction houses, and galleries.

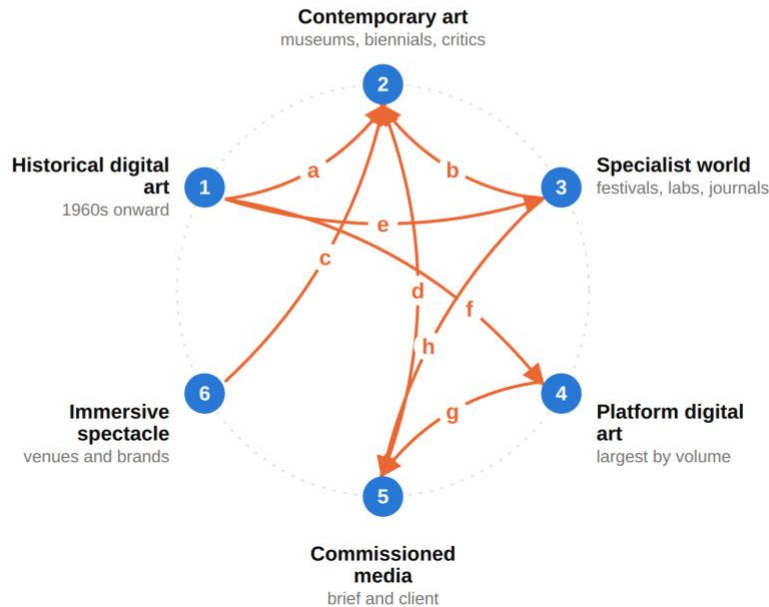
The most visible careers now are often the ones that cross between worlds. Refik Anadol makes large-scale data-driven work for venues, public spaces, and corporate commissions. He also shows at MoMA, so the same practice is received as spectacle in world 6 and validated as contemporary art in world 2. Rafael Lozano-Hemmer came out of the festivals of world 3 and now works largely through museums and galleries, carrying the recognition he earned in world 3 into the institutions of world 2. d'strict formalized the crossing structurally, spinning off a separate artistic unit, a'strict, to make gallery work free of client commissions.

The two graphs below sort these connections by what travels. In **A** the connection is made by movement: someone or something begins to circulate in another world and is valued by different criteria there. In **B** it is made by adoption: a tool, a technique, a format or a model of production is taken up by a world that did not make it.

GRAPH A

The movement of people and works between worlds

Eight crossings. Half of them arrive at world 2, which takes people and works from four other worlds and sends none the other way. The letter on each arrow keys it to the list below.



(a) 1 → 2 Works enter the museum. Computer graphics, generative art, video, cybernetic art, net art and interactive work from the 1960s onward are increasingly exhibited and collected. What changes is the criterion: on arrival the work is valued for historical influence, documentation, preservation and conservation rather than for what it does.

(b) 3 → 2 Artists carry festival standing into galleries. Recognition earned in festivals or other venues of the specialist world can be converted into standing in museums and galleries; museums beginning to collect digital work in the 2010s is what made the conversion possible. However it happens in a given career, the work is then read as contemporary art rather than as technical research.

(c) 6 → 2 Spectacle is shown as contemporary art. Anadol makes large-scale data-driven work for venues, public spaces and corporate commissions — and also shows at MoMA, so the same practice is received as spectacle in world 6 and validated as contemporary art in world 2. d'strict formalised the crossing structurally, spinning off a'strict to make gallery work free of client commissions.

(d) 5 → 2 Designers' own work reaches the art world. The thin direction. Designers trained in art schools, follow exhibitions closely, and make speculative work, redesigns and short films alongside client projects; some of it is shown as art. The traffic the other way — artists and curators looking into world 5 — is thinner still.

(e) 1 → 3 Works re-staged and archived by the field itself. The same early work also circulates inside world 3 — re-shown at festivals, documented at ZKM and in the Archive of Digital Art. Here it is valued as the specialists' own canon, which is a different thing from being valued as art history.

(f) 1 → 4 Canonical work acquires a price. On-chain generative work claimed Molnár and Mohr as ancestry, and the 2021 market followed the citation. The same objects and the same names, valued as a market lineage rather than as a chapter of art history.

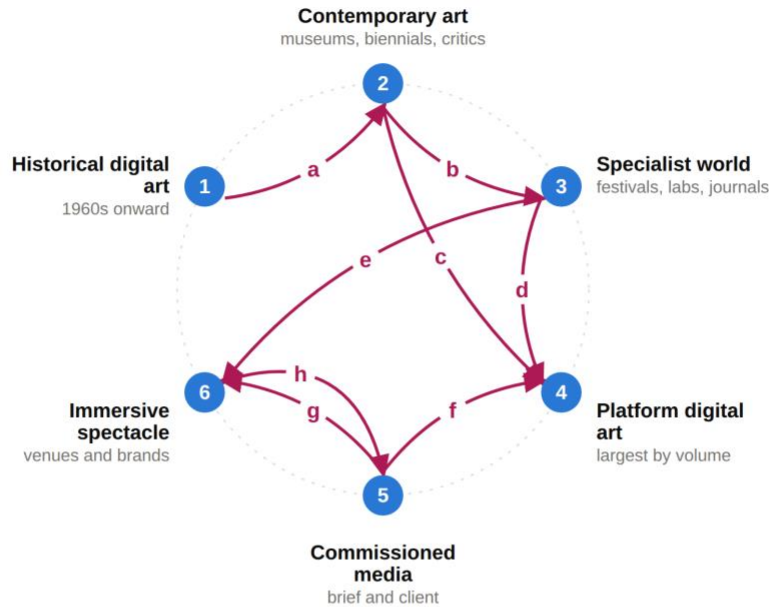
(g) 4 → 5 Platform artists get hired. "Some post to build a portfolio and get hired — here the audience that matters is a future employer." ArtStation and Behance are where studios find concept artists, illustrators and motion designers. The same skill is then rewarded for satisfying a brief rather than for a recognisable personal style.

(h) 3 → 5 Specialists take commissions. Capabilities developed as research get commissioned by clients — for many specialists not an occasional detour but how the practice is funded. On this side of the arrow the research is invisible; only whether the brief is met counts.

GRAPH B

The adoption of one world's tools, techniques and conventions by another

Eight adoptions. World 4 is the largest importer — its software from world 3, its authorship apparatus from world 2, its craft standards from world 5 — and it exports nothing. The letter on each arrow keys it to the list below.



(a) 1 → 2 Algorithmic generation becomes ordinary. What world 1 worked out as a research problem — images and animation produced by rule rather than by hand — is now a default capability in the software every artist already has. Contemporary artists use procedural and generative methods without needing world 1's context and usually without citing it: the technique arrived, its history did not.

(b) 2 → 3 Formats and conventions of showing. Most of the conventions world 3 works within were settled in contemporary art from the 1960s onward: **installation and the environment**; **the instruction as the work**, from Fluxus scores and LeWitt's wall drawings, which is why nobody had to argue that a program could be an artwork; **documentation standing in for the work**, established by performance and land art and now the only form in which most festival pieces survive; **participation**, from which interactivity inherited its legitimacy as an artistic proposition rather than an engineering feat; **site-specificity**, inherited by locative and urban projection work; and **the expectation of a critical position**, the statement and the discursive frame that festivals now require as a matter of course.

(c) 2 → 4 The apparatus of authorship. Named author, numbered edition, provenance, a primary and a secondary market, the artist's statement: the machinery world 2 built for objects was imported more or less whole by the NFT market, which needed a way to make a file behave like an artwork. Art Blocks is world 2's apparatus running on world 4's material.

(d) 3 → 4 The tools. Processing, p5.js, openFrameworks. The languages of platform generative art were written inside world 3 — by Casey Reas, Lauren Lee McCarthy, Zach Lieberman. The software travels; its authors stay where they are.

(e) 3 → 6 Technique at venue scale. Projection mapping, sensor-driven interaction, data as visual material, the artistic use of image models. Methods worked out as research in labs and festivals reappear at the scale of a venue, in the hands of studios that did not develop them. The underlying software mostly comes from industry rather than from artists; what travels from world 3 is not the tool but what to do with it.

(f) 5 → 4 Industry craft standards. What reads as accomplished on ArtStation or Behance is the standard set by film, television and game production — lighting, rendering, finish, the conventions of concept art and of a reel. The bar arrives from world 5, which is also where much of the audience is looking from: a good part of these portfolios is addressed to an art director.

(g) 5 → 6 The studio model. Immersive spectacle runs on world 5's apparatus: a brief, a production pipeline, rounds of approval, credit to the studio rather than to the individual. The one thing not adopted is anonymity — here the work is the attraction and carries the studio's name.

(h) 6 → 5 And back: the client mode. The spectacle studios also work to briefs: teamLab and d'strict each make work that is itself the attraction and work made for a client. Which is why d'strict had to spin off a'strict — to keep the two modes apart inside one company.

Not *what is digital art*, but *which digital art world*?

The number of such crossings is growing. But the great majority of digital artists still operate in only one of the six worlds. An artist may have success without significance, or significance without success. A work can be technically brilliant, popular online, and commercially successful without becoming historically or institutionally significant. Or the reverse: a work may be valued in media art history while remaining invisible in the mainstream market and to most art museums.

Which is why the question of belonging continues to matter. When you encounter a digital artwork, it is not enough to know that it was made with technology. You also need to consider the following questions:

- *In which digital art world does it circulate?*
- *Who validates it?*
- *What does that world reward?*
- *Is it original and interesting in relation to other works in that world?*
- *Will the work survive, and will it still be significant?*

Where to look

If you are new to digital art, there are books and many resources online, and you can also ask an AI assistant to tell you about the field, give you lists of artists and their websites, and so on. Here I want to foreground three institutions that have shaped how this work is documented and seen, and two more recent platforms that have introduced new models. (There are many other platforms and archives; these are simply my own favorites.)

The first three date from the field's institutional beginnings. Founded in 1989 and opened in its Karlsruhe building in 1997, ZKM was the first institution to combine a museum of media art, an archive, production studios and research laboratories. The Archive of Digital Art, begun by Oliver Grau in 1999, is the first large online archive of the field. Founded in 2001 by Christiane Paul, the Whitney Museum's artport was among the first spaces dedicated to digital art at a major art museum, and the only one of its generation still commissioning internet art today.

The two recent ones work differently. Feral File, founded in 2020 by Casey Reas, organizes online exhibitions from which works are sold in editions. CIFRA (chief art curator: Olga Shishko) is a streaming platform and online exhibition space for digital art (disclaimer: I serve on its advisory board).

ZKM | Center for Art and Media Karlsruhe — <https://zkm.de/en>

Archive of Digital Art — <https://digitalartarchive.at>

Whitney Museum artport — <https://whitney.org/artport>

Feral File — <https://feralfile.com>

CIFRA — <https://cifra.com>

Appendix: How the commissioned digital media world works

What are my reasons for including this world? Like in all our worlds, the works here are also created with the same digital tools. And this world also has its own criteria for circulation and evaluation and recognizing who's the best.

Designers in this world tend to know the art world well — many trained in art schools, many follow exhibitions closely, and a good number make their own work alongside client projects. The traffic in the other direction is thinner. Artists, curators, and critics encounter the products of this world constantly but rarely see how it is organized, and so the differences from art practice tend to be understood as a single difference: that this work is made for money. The distinctions are more specific than that, and they are what makes it a distinct world rather than a compromised version of the others.

The brief. Work begins not with an idea the maker wants to pursue but with a document specifying what the work must do: a running time, a platform, a set of technical constraints, a brand's existing visual language, a plot point the audience must understand. Creativity here is the ability to produce something distinctive that satisfies all of these at once. A designer who ignores the brief to make a stronger image has failed, not succeeded.

Iteration and approval. The project develops in stages, from first concepts to final result. At each stage it may be subject to critique by an art director, a creative

director and the client, and then revised. A project may pass through dozens of versions before anything is made. The maker rarely has final authority over the result, and the version that ships is often not the one the maker considers best..

Visibility. Studios and designers maintain public portfolios — a site, a Behance profile, an annual reel. But what appears there is selective and delayed. Client work is often released only after the product ships, sometimes years later, sometimes under NDA and never. What outsiders see is a curated fraction of what a studio actually does.

Credit. A film's screen graphics are credited to a company; the designers who made them are visible mainly to peers. (But in many other cases - for example, a video advertising, an interactive store installation and so - the names of the makers remain invisible.)

Self-initiated work. Alongside commissioned projects, designers make speculative concepts, redesigns, personal experiments, and short films. These demonstrate capabilities the current briefs do not call for, let a designer develop a signature that client work suppresses, and function as an argument about what the field could be doing. They also frequently produce the commissions that follow.

Validation. This world has developed institutions parallel to those of art: Cannes Lions, Communication Arts Awards, the One Show, and others and also, industry conferences and publications. They confer real standing inside the field and are largely unknown outside it — which is precisely what makes it a separate world rather than a lower rung of the others.